Breeding focus worth the weight

Clare BETTER farmer Sean Hayes’s stock are doing the business on the weighing scales, writes Ciarán Lenehan

There are lots of variables at play in beef farming, but when all is said and done it’s about getting kilograms of beef out the gate. The quicker we produce these kilogrammes, the better. In Clare, Sean Hayes has given a masterclass in producing liveweight this year.

He runs 60 suckler cows across 140 acres in Tulla. The farm is split into two blocks two miles apart. Sean has both spring- and autumn-calving groups. His plan is to hit 80 sucklers by the end of the programme, retaining all of his stock for finishing. However, there are a number of obstacles in his way at present. The farm is split into two stands, I’m five behind my target for next season, and am on the lookout for more. As it stands, I move towards finishing,” Sean said.

Analysis of the profit monitor results for both phases one and two of the BETTER farm programme showed that, in general, finishing systems were more profitable than those selling live animals. With this in mind, most of the new programme’s farmers were keen to finish some or all of their stock when we sat down to outline farm plans. However, finishing systems need good raw materials to work - the right animal weight conversion as the Charolais. When I was selling live for the export market they were ideal, but not so much now as I move towards finishing,” Sean said.

Al sires

There is a strong Limousin influence in the cow herd, though Simmental is also prominent and there are hints of everything from Holstein to Parthenaise to Belgian Blue littered throughout. Sean uses a combination of stock bulls and AI in his breeding policy. His own bull has recovered from his bout of lameness to work the autumn herd.

He is by the infamous CF52 and boasts €146 (five stars) on the terminal index. Of Sean’s 2017 calf crop, his stock bull sired 15 and these animals achieved a daily weight gain of 1.39kg across his 33 spring 2017-born calves. The next best in the programme was 45%. Sean’s average suckler cow has a €uro-Star replacement liability 72%.

Among the 2017 spring calvers, the BETTER farm average was 42% - a 619kg cow having produced a 273kg calf at 200 days. The international gold standard is seen as 50%.

Sean Hayes achieved just this, with a 623kg average cow weight and calves at 313kg. This represented a daily weight gain of 1.39kg across his 33 spring 2017-born calves. The next best in the programme was 45%. Sean’s average suckler cow has a €uro-Star replacement value of €56, just on the five-star threshold, and is positive for milk (+68g).

Bull trouble

Also, on many beef farms, winter accommodation space becomes the first factor limiting expansion. This is the case in Tulla, though Sean is ready to break rock on a five-bay slatted shed.

A significant hurdle came in the form of unexpected stock bull trouble this breeding season.

“After my own bull went lame, a replacement that we brought in seemed definitely one to follow in the programme. Weaning efficiency is defined simply as the percentage of a cow’s own body weight that she has produced in the form of a 200-day-old calf. It is a measure we widely used internationally and will likely attract more momentum on these shores as the suckler cow genes debate gathers traction. If we can identify cows that are more efficient at producing weight than others, it would go some of the way towards addressing this issue.

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